Study of Existence and Divine Vicegerency: Between Jeffrey Lang's Theory and the Doctrine of Shia Imamism

About twelve years ago, I watched for the first time the lecture "The Purpose of Life" by the American professor Jeffrey Lang, a mathematics professor. I was so captivated by it that I may have seen it up to twenty times, and it had a significant impact on my intellectual transformation over the years. I kept revisiting it to learn something new each time, and I recommended it to everyone with whom I discussed comparative religion (I even engaged in discussions with both Christians and atheists for a while). The important thing is that this comprehensive theory that Jeffrey Lang derived from analyzing the Quranic text had a profound effect in reinforcing my faith.

[A.]

Dr. Jeffrey Lang recounts that one of his students gifted him a translation of the Quran. After some time, he began reading it as one would read a novel or any book, until he reached the verse in the early part of Surah Al-Baqarah:

"And when your Lord said to the angels, 'Indeed, I will make upon the earth a vicegerent.' They said, 'Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we exalt You with praise and sanctify You?' He said, 'Indeed, I know that which you do not know.'"

...and he was shocked!

Lang had left Christianity and embraced atheism for psychological reasons related to the problem of evil; his mother was a kind person, almost saintly in her good morals, while his father was a drunkard, quick to anger and abusive toward his wife and children through beatings and insults. Consequently, he used to pray to God to save his mother from such torment and would wonder, "Why does God allow his father to beat his mother and treat her badly without intervening?"

He concluded that the presence of evil in the world proves that God does not exist—and so he became an atheist.

The main reason for Jeffrey Lang's atheism was that he became convinced through reason that it is impossible for a Creator to fashion human beings who are immune to mistakes and evils, only to then leave them to acts of violence, crimes, and murder on earth without intervening to stop them. This is essentially the same moral dilemma posed by Epicurus: "Why does God not prevent evil, either by creating man inherently good by nature or by directly intervening to eliminate the wicked? If He is not able to prevent evil and therefore does not, then He is not all-good; and if He is not able to prevent it, then He is not all-powerful!"

Jeffrey Lang further wondered, "Why did God not create us as angels and send us to paradise? If it is possible for God to create us as angels, then why did He make us prone to committing evils? Why did He not create us sinless, as He created the angels?" Thus, his shock was immense when he found the angels asking God the same question:

"They said, 'Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we exalt You with praise and sanctify You?'"

Of course, Jeffrey Lang understood that the Qur'an contains an answer to this question and that its author offers a philosophical theory addressing the problem of evil. He then began studying the Qur'anic text in depth to comprehend the answer to this existential question, focusing on what the Qur'an says about the relationship between the Creator and humanity and the ethical dimensions of that relationship.

It was God's reply to the angels—*"Indeed, I know that which you do not know"* — that attracted Jeffrey Lang to explore the philosophy of existence in the Qur'an. This response indicates that the author of the Qur'an believed there is profound divine wisdom behind creating human beings with such a free nature that exceeds the understanding of both the angels and humans themselves. At that time, Lang did not believe that the Qur'an was the word of God, so that very answer ignited in him

the challenge to understand the existential philosophy embedded within the Qur'anic text.

During his study of the Qur'an, Jeffrey Lang discovered that what distinguishes human existence in the Qur'anic perspective is that man was not placed on earth as a punishment for sin—as is the case in Christianity—but rather as a [vicegerent of God and His representative]. In this view, man exists on earth for a positive purpose, not as a punishment for the original sin; he is created to serve as the representative of the Creator on earth and is entrusted with the responsibility of managing it and establishing justice. This concept imposes a profound moral responsibility on man, one that goes far beyond the traditional conceptions of the relationship between the Creator and the created found in other religions.

Jeffrey Lang sees that, in the Qur'anic theory of existence, man is considered "an ethical being entrusted with the responsibility of managing the earth on behalf of God." Therefore, the Creator granted him the gifts of reason, language, speech, and free will so that he could fulfill this role. This is the meaning of the verse, "And He taught Adam the names of all things." By nature, man is "a being who learns" and "a being who speaks"; God endowed him with language so that he might be capable of learning and exchanging experiences and knowledge across generations, contributing to the accumulation of science and wisdom.

This ethical mandate is, in Jeffrey Lang's view, the essential link in the relationship between God and man through the principle of vicegerency. Man is not merely an ordinary creature; rather, he is God's vicegerent on earth, charged with the responsibility of managing it and establishing justice. A great moral duty is thus imposed upon man—a role that transcends the conventional concepts of the relationship between the Creator and the created found in other religions.

The explanation for the presence of evil on earth, then, necessitates an understanding of the issue of man's vicegerency to God. The Qur'an regards man as a being with free will, for he bears moral responsibility

for his actions. Consequently, he is rational and free to choose between good and evil, endowed with the capacity to learn and decide. Man's existence on earth is not that of a fallen creature "burdened by sin and in need of divine salvation"; rather, he exists with a mission and purpose that require freedom—and such freedom entails that the Creator allow for the occurrence of evils through human actions, until the Day of Judgment arrives.

Jeffrey Lang further contends that this ethical vicegerency—with its accompanying gifts of language, reason, and free will—is precisely what the angels could not comprehend. They inquired about the wisdom behind creating a being who might corrupt the earth and shed blood—that is, a being capable of acting independently from its Creator and committing evils. In response, God succinctly said, "Indeed, I know that which you do not know." In other words, the issue of vicegerency carries epistemological dimensions that exceed the angels' capacity for understanding. God then introduced them to this new creature through its intellectual and cognitive endowments, which they could not have imagined, and subsequently commanded them to prostrate before Adam, making them subservient to serve this human being on earth.

As for the trials, suffering, and evils that afflict man in his earthly existence, they indeed play a role in purifying him and strengthening his connection with his Creator. They are essential for ethical vicegerency, which requires free will; for they compel him to discover his existential role, to use his intellectual capacity and freedom, and to strive in self-discipline. Suffering thus plays a positive role in human existence on earth—it is not pure evil—since it guides man toward knowing his Creator, understanding the purpose of his existence, and realizing the responsibility he bears.

This Qur'anic perspective on man—that his existence is founded upon reason, freedom, the endurance of suffering, self-discipline, responsibility, and patience—affords him a dignity and value that surpass traditional religious portrayals. It establishes a balanced relationship with the Creator based on responsibility and voluntary servitude rather than mere fear and awe.

Furthermore, the link between man and his Creator is that man should embody God's Beautiful Names. Just as God is the source of reason, knowledge, and freedom, He is likewise the source of ethics. The closer a person approaches "moral perfection," the more he fulfills the purpose of his existence and draws near to his Creator. Conversely, when he commits evils, he deviates from embodying those Beautiful Names, thereby failing in his duty and shirking his moral responsibility—consequently distancing himself from the Creator and warranting divine retribution.

At this point, Jeffrey Lang's theory comes to an end. Although we may agree with much of it, it remains incomplete, for it assumes that vicegerency is universal to all humanity. The angels' objection remains unsolved: Why did God not make all of humanity inherently obedient and devoted in worship, if He were capable of doing so?

[B.]

Understanding the vicegerency of humankind is keyed to the fact that Adam (peace be upon him) is God's answer to the angels' question—in other words, he is the embodiment that God intended when He said, "Indeed, I will make upon the earth a vicegerent." The angels assumed that this vicegerency was universal—a mistake also made by Jeffrey Lang. However, when God presented Adam along with all the names to the angels, He indicated to them, "These are My vicegerents whom I intended, and not those who kill and corrupt."

Here, a clear distinction emerges between God's vicegerent and the rest of God's creation; for God's vicegerent holds a divine office that is directly connected to the Creator and achieves complete servitude to Him. Moreover, he plays a guiding role for creation—just as the sun, the moon, and the stars serve the people, or as a luminous lamp in darkness, or as the straight path for the travelers. This vicegerent is God's proof upon creation, leading people toward God.

Thus, it was necessary that God's vicegerents possess special knowledge and formative guidance not available to other people, for they "encompassed within themselves all potentials of perfection and were the complete manifestation of the Necessary Being." Through them, God is made known, and emulating them is the way to perform righteous deeds and attain piety. They serve as the indispensable intermediary between the Creator and humanity and as the means by which the material world connects with the divine realm—because they are "a complete manifestation of the Necessary Being," meaning they fully embody God's Beautiful Names in their very persons, thereby enabling humans to recognize and communicate with God.

Jeffrey Lang concluded in his research on the "Qur'anic Theory of Creation" that the bond between humanity and the Creator is manifested in the divine commandments of the Qur'an, which guide people to follow the attributes of the Beautiful Names and to avoid that which contradicts them—that is, the intermediary between God and humanity is the written Qur'anic commandments.

However, had Jeffrey Lang taken the time to study the doctrine of the Ahl al-Bayt regarding the necessity of coupling the Book with the Infallible (the understanding that the Book alone did not safeguard previous nations from distortion), he would have realized that the Jews compiled the Talmud over centuries to circumvent God's legislative commandments in the Torah and to derive benefits from it. God described them by saying:

"So woe to those who write the Scripture with their own hands and then say, 'This is from Allah,' in order to exchange it for a small price. Woe to them for what their hands have written, and woe to them for what they earn."

Moreover, the Muslims followed the example of the Jews and Christians in circumventing and nullifying God's commandments and in justifying injustices under the pretext of interest and preserving power. The evidence is that the text alone is insufficient for guiding humanity, as it is prone to distortion or erroneous interpretation.

Thus, the Qur'anic theory concerning "the purpose of human existence on earth" is only complete once the concept of divine Imamate is understood. The Imam, as God's proof, is described as "the inheritor of the Book; the one who calls to his Lord's path with wisdom, good admonition, and conclusive proof," and he is one who "rules by God's Book; determines what is lawful and what is forbidden according to God," and he is "God's guardian who upholds God's limits and defends His religion," in accordance with the verse:

"And from among those We created, there is a community that guides by truth and establishes justice."

Furthermore, the Imam (God's vicegerent and His proof on earth) is "the guide to righteousness and the savior from ruin"—meaning that he leads people toward their existential purpose and shows them the means to achieve it. He is also "the exemplar" that God has provided for humanity; that is, a person who fully embodies the attributes of God's Beautiful Names. His behavior and condition serve as evidence of his knowledge of these Beautiful Names and his adherence to them, as confirmed by the verse:

"Those are the ones whom Allah has guided, so from their guidance take an example."

This moral role of the Imam makes him the model of ethical perfection that every individual should strive toward in order to fulfill the purpose of his existence on earth.

Thus, we are now discussing the "dialectic between divine transcendence and manifestation." On the one hand, the Qur'an emphasizes the exaltation of the Divine Self and its transcendence over created beings, as indicated by the verse, "There is nothing like unto Him." On the other hand, it also points to the manifestation of divine attributes in the material world through God's embodiment of His Beautiful Names.

Here, the doctrine of divine Imamate provides the solution that puzzled Jeffrey Lang. It does so by presenting the concept of (Imamate) as an expression of divine attributes—the perfect human who embodies God's Beautiful Names without being a partner in divinity. The Imam exemplifies divine qualities such as knowledge, mercy, and justice, yet he remains a servant of God rather than an equal. This understanding aligns with Lang's view of the relationship between God and man as one based on servitude and direct spiritual communication.

Likewise, the concept of vicegerency implies a continuous connection between humanity and their Creator so that they may know His will. In his spiritual journey with the Qur'an, Lang found that its verses served as a medium for cognitive communication with God—the Qur'an represents the manifestation of divine knowledge in a linguistic form that humans can comprehend and assimilate. And he is right; however, he did not complete the path… For the Hadith of the Two Weighty Things (al-Thaqalayn) emphasizes the necessity of coupling the Book with the Ahl al-Bayt, as they are the inheritors of the Book and the proof of the Qur'an in matters that may arise for the Muslims which they cannot interpret from its verses alone—or when disagreements occur in interpreting a matter on which they rely solely on the Book, leading to differing understandings of God's intent in the Qur'anic verses.

Thus, the Infallible Imam is essential for humanity to receive divine knowledge through revelation when differences arise, for he then transmits that divine knowledge to the people in a manner that suits their intellectual capacities. In the presence of the Imam, such guidance cannot be envisaged as something extricated from earthly existence, because it is vital for the continuity of God's vicegerency—which, as we have learned from reflecting on the verse "Indeed, I will make upon the earth a vicegerent," is the ultimate purpose of human existence.

[C.]

It is evident that Jeffrey Lang's theory—extracted from an abstract analysis of the Qur'anic text—leads the researcher to the necessity of

divine Imamate as revealed in the Qur'an. Whoever contemplates the Qur'an from the perspective we have outlined—that is, by understanding the ultimate purpose of existence, the moral mandate imposed upon humans, and the concept of vicegerency—will inevitably deduce the doctrine of divine Imamate, which is reiterated on every page of the Qur'an.